(a) the role, if any, of the Commonwealth Government, its policies and practices in contributing to forced adoptions; and
(b) the potential role of the Commonwealth in developing a national framework to assist states and territories to address the consequences for the mothers, their families and children who were subject to forced adoption policies.

Re: Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices.

I am the mother of a son who I relinquished for adoption in Victoria in 1968. I was an immature 21 year old, born in WA to a conventional conservative middleclass family and taking my first steps away from home and family by working in Victoria.

I have few memories of the events that preceded me living in a home for unmarried mothers in Brunswick, Victoria. I felt shamed and stigmatised by being pregnant and unmarried and I did not tell any of my family or friends. I must have gone to a doctor and presumably arrangements were made for me to be admitted to the home.

Living in the home for 4½ months was a very impersonal, detached experience for me. No-one on the staff made the effort to befriend me or offer me any support or counselling and this feeling of isolation from everything and everybody pervaded the whole institution. I felt totally alone. At no time was I invited to discuss my pregnancy , to talk about my future or my child's future. The emphasis was always on adoption being what was 'best for the child' – 'if you love your baby then you will give it up for adoption'. There was never any acknowledgment that to relinquish my child would be a major loss for me and for him. I was not treated as an expectant mother but rather encouraged to think of my baby as not being mine but belonging to some perfect deserving married couple.

A doctor came regularly to the institution and when I was examined, any information about my or my baby's health was addressed to the nurse who was present in the room, never to me directly. No information or instruction was given to prepare me for the birth itself about which I was totally ignorant (in common with most young women at that time). I felt ignored, totally disempowered and worthless. The understanding was that I would be taken in pregnant and that I would leave no longer pregnant but without my baby.

I have no memory of the actual birth and did not see my son after he was born. The staff did what they had to do without any empathy or explanation. No one was sympathetic about the child I was losing and in my ignorance I believed what I had been told: I would forget all about it.

Several days after the birth I was returned to the home and released after signing documents but without any acknowledgment of the loss I was experiencing.

I returned to Perth and for 23 years did not speak about my shameful secret to anyone other than to tell my husband-to-be. I reasoned that he needed to know so that he could back out of marrying me if he wished. Since the loss of my son I have been married and divorced twice and have had a number of psychological issues to deal with. My confidence and self esteem were totally compromised and my ability to trust and develop good relationships, including with my subsequent children, was impaired. I had no understanding of or outlet for the grief I felt. I was told that I would forget the loss of my child and my inability to forget became another failure in my mind. My life after the surrender of my son became muted – a life half lived.

Now, after many years of counselling and attending support groups I believe that the whole of this experience could have been very different for me if I had been informed and supported by the doctor I went to initially, by the people running the home where I stayed, by the doctor who examined me in the home, and by the staff at the hospital where I was ignored and treated very poorly.

I cannot recall any time when I was invited to discuss my options including the idea of keeping my child. The assumption was that my child would be taken; he was not mine. Of course if there had been financial assistance for single mothers, the attitude of society would have been very different and maybe there would have been support people who could have offered alternatives to such a life changing event for myself and for my child.

My son found and contacted me when he was 23 years old and I eventually got up the courage to tell my other children about his existence. My eldest son to my marriage said: " Now, it makes sense. I always felt that something was wrong and I never felt like the eldest."

For the past 16 years I have worked as a researcher and office administrator for Adoption Jigsaw WA. I speak on a daily basis with many people who have been through the experience of adoption loss – birth mothers and fathers, adopted adults and their spouses and members of their extended families.

Like me some women have coped by suppressing the whole experience and they too feel guilty for not being able to remember the details, even the date of birth and I have to reassure them that this is a fairly common way of dealing with the trauma. Others can recall every detail of the birth and every subsequent birthday, every mothers' day,

every special event. Most women from both groups find it impossible to forget or ignore or overcome the consequences. Some will say they thought that it hadn't really affected them at all. That they just got on with their lives as instructed. Then a pet dies or there is a loss in the family or their child comes looking for them and this can trigger their suppressed 'feelings', sometimes quite overwhelmingly.

My journey has been and still is to learn to understand the effects of this loss and be aware of how it has impacted on every aspect of my life, my decisions, my reactions and my responses; to let go of the sense of shame and guilt and to finally grieve the loss of my firstborn. What greater loss is there for any mother than to lose her child or for any child than to lose its mother?

Over the years I have heard it said "but that was your choice" so many many times. And it is still to this day society's general perception that unmarried mothers in the past chose to give up their babies for adoption. I put it to you that it is impossible for any mother to both provide for and care for a newborn at one and the same time. Simply by withholding financial and emotional support governments/society/families gave us no other choice. We were sent on our way without even permission to grieve.

An acknowledgment by the Commonwealth Government that past federal and state government practices condoned, aided and abetted the separation of mothers from their babies simply because they were unmarried is essential to the wellbeing of all those affected by adoption loss.

Furthermore, I believe that commonwealth funding for support and therapy groups and individual counselling is essential to support these unacknowledged mothers, the adoptees who were 'transplanted', and their families to address the consequences of their loss which has never been recognised by our society.

I reiterate, there is no greater loss for a mother than to lose a child, nor for a child, than to lose its mother. To have to bear this loss in unacknowledged silence is devastating.

Ann Allpike 28/03/2011